**By Turns Escapee and Chaser**

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# By Turns Escapee and Chaser

by mayinwinter

Summary

"If Lecter's on line and forced in a neural station, they are not going to let him wander freely. They are either deconstructing his walls still, or sifting through the outer layers of his decoy mind. Either way I can't find a connection to him that easily".

"It's been weeks. What if they already broke through?" –Price questioned from the front.

"Not likely. Lecter's got decoys over decoys" –Will shrugged, uncomfortable. The absurd feeling of betrayal liked to make unwelcome come backs from time to time.

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Three holding locations, three possible places where to find Lecter, and Will is losing his patience. He is sure Lecter can hold his own, the man would first die than break. But the chase is coming to an end, and there are no clear signs yet. Will worries. Bev, Zeller and Jimmy work.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

*<Problem-solving is hunting; it is savage pleasure and we are born to it.>*

***The Silence of the Lambs, Thomas Harris.***

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Will watched as the last structures and signs of urbanization gave way to country roads and vegetation. His eyes were taking in the images in a reflexive manner, while his mind processed less than ten percent of his sight captures, thoughts processes focused in the connections firing away between his portable station and the rest of the tracker devices.

He had high resolution connectors on both ears, plus frontal shielding, in the form of soft adherent white patches the size of a nickel, on his temples hiding somewhere under his unruly hair. These pieces were additional to his wrist tracker, mobile comm and the small foldable head set and rubber keyboard that had been included in his outfit.

He was back in a horrible dark SUV that, along with at least five more vehicles, was making its way from a local airport and fast towards their destination.

To his right, Brian Zeller was looking out the other window, a connector on his ear, also in possession of the standard tracker and comm and a particular utility belt that would be funny in any other circumstances. Well. It wasn't funny in any other circumstances, to be morally correct. Comprehensive forensics was a term used for those who did the usual evidence lifting in physical and mental realms. Members of this branch of neural sciences did not do so well with moving consciousness, more oriented towards lifting impressions already static and finite. Their tools of trade were a mix of containers and instruments and solutions as well as lenses and gloves wirelessly linked to their ear buds for the immaterial evidence collection.

Jimmy Price was riding shotgun, from time to time cracking a joke or making a sarcastic comment, going over his own instruments in one final check. Driving was Beverly Katz, the only one who had Bureau-issued weapons at her disposition. Shot-and-bleed weapons, at least. She was holding her end of the conversation absentmindedly.

Will knew she worried about Jack. Will was worried too, now more than ever. He hadn't been allowed to speak with him yet. During the two days that took issuing his equipment and locating the labs, Will had requested a meeting with the man at least three times. Communications, the whatever-is-his-name guy, had firmly stated Jack was detained under severe observation. Will had thought the young man would crack fast, but he should have known better than doubting an officer so obviously loyal to Purnell.

Z, Katz and Price had been engrossed in the reading of evidence to achieve the exact location of the labs, seeing as all official information had been tampered with from the military files themselves, and so far they had only run into fake data of empty patches of land.

What's more, they didn't seem willing to talk to Will. Will felt their relief at his appearance and involvement with the mission, that what obvious, but whatever Jack had done, they clearly didn't want to let on.

“So what do you think, hm? Your sixth sense tingling yet? By Occam’s razor, door number one would show us our prize, right?” – Zeller spoke after some strained silence.

“The reading of evidence would be more useful in narrowing the location of Lecter, it’s what I think” –Will dryly replied after a beat, catching the sarcasm.

Zeller turned to give him a mildly resentful glance.

“Yeah, from what conclusive evidence we have, Lecter and his groupies could be all the way to Bali. Either these people who decided to take Lecter out for a stroll had full knowledge of how to break through the bureau’s safeguards, or…that’s it, actually. Everything’s too neat”.

“I hate to fuel Brian’s conspiracy theories, but this time I’ve got to agree.”

“Thanks, man, warms my heart.”

“You’re welcome, boy.”

“You know I’m right, though. Remember that time with the Egyptian parchment and the bunch of people in 500 a.C with the common recurring dream, and then that Senator wanted to be all hush hush on the-“

“Good grief, guys, stop with that already”- Katz groused, completing their bickering routine when under pressure.

Will knew they were not usual faces on active crime scenes. All of them were more used to cold ones, or at least, lukewarm ones with minimum possibilities to be shot in the face by what seemed to be an outlaw hostile group.

“Can’t you feel him out there, though? Nothing on Lecter? He must be hooked to something, easier for you to catch on some whispers, no?” –Zeller asked, eyes back on Will.

Will knew his relationship with the cannibal psychiatrist was his unescapable precedent, but among these people, it felt unfair to get his face rubbed on it. They had all been friendly to the man, for fucks sake. Zeller himself had in many occasions stood by Lecter, engaging him in conversation. Lecter had been too polite to ignore him, and Zeller loved to get attention. Will had watched those exchanges happen, sharing seconds of eye contact with the doctor and indulging in tenuous mental connections to find out if the doctor was annoyed at the technician, but every time he had only received back from the older man a reading of gentle amusement and mild interest.

So really, Will was in no mood to hear yet another jab at his truncated love story with a madman, as the media had once tried to paint it over three years ago.

“If Lecter’s on line and forced in a neural station, they are not going to let him wander freely. They are either deconstructing his walls still, or sifting through the outer layers of his decoy mind. Either way I can’t find a connection to him that easily”.

“It’s been weeks. What if they already broke through?” –Price questioned from the front.

“Not likely. Lecter’s got decoys over decoys” –Will shrugged, uncomfortable. The absurd feeling of betrayal liked to make unwelcome come backs from time to time. What the fuck Will cared if the man had never been truthful to him. He was a criminal, fuck it. He didn’t want Hannibal’s confidences- “Besides, if that were so, then he wouldn’t be valuable for selling. A weapon so easily defeated wouldn’t be a good investment.”

“Huh. So you heard?” –Katz made a face, looking at Will through the rear mirror- “Some wacko trigger-happy junior in the force team got into his brain to go public with the Weapon L moniker. I heard Purnell flayed him alive, when she caught wind of it. Must be the guy in the gray van with the permanent expression of stomachache, you’ll see him soon enough”.

Will raised an eyebrow, displaying the reader screen on his comm device. H.L. Recovery Case, the files read.

Thank all the minor deities, then, that it was not W.L. Recovery Case. What a fucked up joke that other file had been.

“So, Hannibal the Cannibal is safe and sound in his sand castle, while two lab guys are brain dead back in the Ward, a bunch of other people is hell knows going through what other experiments as the guinea pigs for his monster brain, the boss is fighting for his hide, and we are ten minutes from being deployed along with two SWAT teams. Fantastic” –amidst his complaints, Zeller was suiting up.

Will didn’t need to check to know Price and Katz were as ready as they’d be, too. When push came to shove, they were reliable, Jack’s team. Riding with them had been one of his few not so terrible choices these last days. There were many others in the investigation and extraction force team that watched him with a healthy dose of suspicion. Will didn’t give a rat’s ass about it. Or so he told himself.

“So Jack is not coming?”- Will asked, finally out loud, as all the vehicles parked when the massive lab building came into view.

Katz turned to give him a flat stare.

“I think he’d be here if he could.”

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All eyes turned to Will, when the last word of the preparation was given to him, before the ALL MOVE signal was to be ordered by mission command.

“Whatever you do, leave Lecter to me. If you find him first, don’t get close, call up your comm and hold back. Don’t touch him, don’t look at him, don’t talk to him. He’ll be restrained. Don’t shoot him, don’t pull at any wire or connector or tube sticking out of him. But if by any reason you do encounter him unrestrained, shoot to the head. Don’t try for immobilization. A head wound will take him out and has very low probabilities to kill him, believe it. Any notion of other temporal containment you’ve been trained for, forget it. Either take him out or move away. In either case make it known, I’ll take lead. Just don’t engage him. Do your task, Lecter’s mine.”

Will could feel his mind unfurling, a great creature previously in repose now standing up, eyes wide open, all the shadows and all the whispers and all the violence in massive measures of potential energy making themselves aware. His metaphorical fists went white at the knuckles in the effort to contain himself and his mind now wired into high capacity through neural technology and his own sudden anxiety. He concentrated in reining the laser sharp focus of his thoughts in zeroing onto the mere traces of a known entity, the cool waters and soft murmuring of Lecter's mind.

The point man gave the signal, and they went.

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By dusk, the team had made their way back to the local airport.

Once the containment shield and safeguards had gone down in the perimeter of the first lab, the gates had opened to expose an immense space of state-of-the-art technology, dead in its abandonment and cold in its emptiness.

Red herring number one.

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Three days later, they had broken through the protection system of an underground research center housing several brain dead patients, silent and gloomy technicians and obscure neural connection stations, more oriented towards dubious medical experimentation than military development.

Disgustingly enough, the man in charge had all the papers in accordance to government regulations (those regulations never made public) and, while disdainful of the Military Research Unit, he admitted to housing some of their "patients from time to time. Not since almost four years ago, though".

Will watched their mission leader, a tall square man of black eyes, black hair and blackest disposition, growl in demand for the reasons why the lab had never replied to the previous communications that could have stopped the infiltration mission on time.

Unimpressed, the resident Director quoted their protocols of no outside contact unless sanctioned by a state of national calamity or direct message from the Presidential detail.

Without any qualm or sense of guilt, Will took over his brain easily enough, his wireless connectors still activated.

The man was a pig. He should make him disconnect all the "specimens". He should erase part of his medical knowledge. He should induce in him a horrible sense of persecution and store years worth of nightmares in his brain. He should, he could, it would be so easy, so easy. The mere thought about it, with enough conviction from Will, would make it happen.

In the corner of his left eye, Will could tell that both Katz and Zeller were looking at him strangely. Katz turned away first. For once, Zeller succeeded in holding a neutral expression

for one steady minute, and then turning towards the same direction as the other techs.

Will wondered if something of what he was thinking had made a flash appearance on his face.

Will was nauseated. The man was a pig, yes, but he was telling the truth.

Red herring number two.

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The night before they took their flight towards the third lab, all units scattered about in unsuspecting motels and hostels, Will's cellphone rang. The Bureau-issued cellphone.

Frowning, he accepted the call.

"Will."

Will pressed his lips firmly together.

"Jack. Nice of you to call."

"I'd be there if I could. Do you doubt that?" –the voice had the same strength of conviction and brusque manners of the permanently irritated.

Will sighed, making an effort to let go.

"No, no, I know. What the hell is happening with you, Jack? You got me in this, do me the courtesy of sharing the reason why I am back in this crap for."

"Big picture, Will. Forget about what's happening here. I want you with your all out there, focused, damned focused".

"We've got nothing out here yet, and you know it. Not a breeze on Lecter. He's not in my radar at all. And these places. Who did reckon on this shit? It's all smoke. We're being played. Whoever is pulling the strings up there wants a show, fireworks and all the big guns. Later on they will say they did everything they could to get the damn bastard back but no dice, Lecter's lost. And then they'll be transplanting pieces of his brain into machines or keeping him medicated to the gills to force hallucinations out of him. Sell his nightmares to ally terrorist cells. Cannibalize his mind for profit, the irony."

"The places are real, Will. It's the best piece of info we've got. It was forcefully extracted from the assistant to the Presidential Technical Secretary himself. So I need you to worry about that now, and forget about the small details. I heard you went out of focus today. Are you good, or you need to be centered?"

Will almost snarled. Almost.

Katz, or Zeller. Zeller, very most likely.

“I did nothing.”

“Did you not notice your tracker and comm going haywire? People saw computer terminals getting short circuited, and they probably think it’s you. It worries me, when you lose it in between realities. You know it’s bad. I don’t have patience for bad right now, Will”.

Did he notice? No, he didn’t. For all he cared, it could have been a malfunction.

Or maybe it was him. Will was very capable of fusing realities when properly inclined, and with enough battery power wired in him.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jack”.

“Don’t make this into what it’s not. You know I’m in your corner. You know if someone gets you, it’s me”.

Will closed his eyes, silently shook his head.

*No, no, it’s not you.*

*Fuck it.*

“Will you tell me what’s going on, now? Are you actually detained, what, they want to prosecute you and risk an even worse scandal?”

“I’ll be fine”.

“Yeah, sure, fine. But why did you do it? You knew Lecter would make minced meat of anyone who dared touch his brain. I told you so, we both told everyone so. The hell, Jack, you’re lucky you’re alive”.

A minute of silence, weirdly free of mobile signal buzzing and echo.

“We’ll talk when you’re back, Will. Just pay attention to what I tell you. Focus. Big white picture. Forget the smoke. These people can’t risk it out of the country with a bound Lecter and the machinery they need to keep him quiet. When you find them, and you will, remember what we’ve talked about, the big red button”.

“Better dead than open to destructive immersion, yes. I may not know who these people are, but if they are after what they are after, they know how dangerous is to be put in the position of prisoner of the Mind Ward. They’ll want to go kamikaze on this shit”.

A harrumph from the other end of the line.

“To use an expression, yes. Go to sleep now”.

Will disconnected.

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The chase was at its end, it seemed.

Laboratory number three, blown to kingdom come, currently a mass of churning plastic and iron and toxic fumes.

Early morning of that Tuesday had seen them arriving to the location, and before any of the SWAT teams had had the chance to put a foot in the perimeter, the detonations had started.

Will, along with the other mind-manipulation technicians of the team, had joined connections to redirect the water network to the surroundings and to interrupt the gas and electricity from the area. The three other manipulators were taking charge of long-range thought synchronization with the people in water, gas and energy plants, while Will did the physical bit, opening tanks and neutralizing high-tension cables.

He had put on the head set, his ear buds were on, all transmitters running, and a mobile phrenakhartes unit, small but serviceable, had been deployed to his left. His hands were in full contact with the tactile reading pad, while his eyes were fixed on the ball of fire.

The fire was contained, one seamless, firm, barely visible crystal-like sphere projected out of Will's mind, covering the lab grounds like a dome.

The force team had fanned out to cover the nearby grounds, but Will already knew no one was there. There was no reading of human minds in the area but for them.

Stepping out of his body for some minutes, Will entered the lab on fire, going through the wreck and the flames, his immaterial projection fully alert and conscious. The machinery inside was standard, what had remained from the blast had all the evidence to be navigation stations, energy hubs, a variety of wired and wireless connectors.

There were no human remains in the place. And the last trace of human presence was weeks old, and those were vague, two of them, distantly neutral, female, disinterested, minds full of laws and citations and papers of eviction. Nothing useful.

The chase was at its end, it seemed.

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All team members, SWAT, technicians, investigators, forensics, were ordered back to Virginia in the next available plane from the B.R.C. Air Force Base acting as their landing point that same Tuesday.

One month spent running after empty targets had everyone on low morale. As they all loaded their equipment, Will allowed, for the very first time since this started, doubt to enter his thoughts.

What if they had killed Lecter? If no one can handle him, no one will have him. They could have entertained such logic.

What if Lecter had killed them all, and was already far from here, leaving no trace, not even a sign for Will to stop this headless chicken run.

Lecter just had to know that Will would get involved. The man had made damn sure. They both had gotten too close.

*Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal.*

Or something worse. What if they had gone through Hannibal's defenses? It was laughable, impossible.

But Will could not forget, the man was human after all. With an individual skilled enough in phrenakarthes, with a neural station powerful enough, and with Lecter restrained and weakened, it was only a matter of time and persistence. They could hammer down any wall. They would lose men to the task, but they could do it.

*'It is a mercy'*, Hannibal had said, *'not to share this part of myself with you'.*

If Hannibal could not control his own khartes, maybe not even Hannibal was safe when being immersed into.

Will swallowed, having worked himself into rising anxiety, and tried to stop wildly theorizing, focusing in double checking the cinching on the security belts around delicate energy tanks. To his left, the comprehensive forensics worked in tandem, their usual bickering, their usual silences.

Will had tried not to resent them for reporting him to Jack as if he were a misbehaving five year old, and so far he was succeeding. He guessed it would be okay to sit relatively close to them in the flight back.

As Will approached them, Zeller turned to look at him, and with a perfectly serious expression, he spoke to Will.

"So what do you think, hm? Your sixth sense tingling yet? By Occam's razor, door number one would show us our prize, right?"

Will didn't even bother fighting the frown.

"That didn't make sense back then, and makes less sense now, Zeller" –he muttered, noticing that at least he wasn't alone in his disgruntled expression. Katz and Price were shaking their heads too.

Zeller heaved up another box of stored solutions, and once again looked at Will, this time with a puzzled expression.

"What do you mean? What did I say?"

"You're not funny, Z, drop it" –Price bumped the other man in the shoulder, disapproving.

"No, what? Hey! I didn't say anything!"

Will froze for a second, and then coming out of his unconscious hunch and with brisk steps, walked to stand face to face with Zeller.

Katz and Price had also moved closer, eyes fixed on Zeller. The man was looking at them as if he was being put in peer review for a journal paper.

“You said that before. My sixth sense. Occam’s razor. Back in the car on day one” – Will said, words slow and slightly skeptical.

“Who do you think you are, one of the nine wonders of nature? Sixth sense, I never said that” –Zeller argued, offended.

*Oh.*

*Oh. Oh.*

Will felt his eyes widening, looking at Zeller, reading the utter truth from him.

“Z, you did, back when you started pissing Will off about his spider-man senses tingling and then jumped to your conspiracy theories” –Price explained, and to Will the older man sounded half hopeful but half doubtful as well.

“No way. Graham here started it, he told me just like nothing, that if we had done a better job at the evidence we could have narrowed down which lab was Lecter’s new home. I didn’t start crap”.

“Brian, you went over your conspiracy-“

“Yes yes I said that, and I said Graham was a Lecter Whisperer. Well, I implied it, but what gives? He was the one who started it”.

“Did you call Jack and report me when I got angry while at the second lab?” – Will asked, finally finding his voice again –“Was it you, any of you?”

Now it was Will’s turn to be examined like a microscope sample by the forensic team, and it would have been slightly amusing for Will to see how similar the three of them reacted, but their expressions were short of horrified.

“Will” –Katz addressed him after a pause- “Jack’s been in a comma since his second attempt to immerse into Lecter’s brain. He’s being cared for and under strict observation in the medical unit of the Bureau of the Mind ever since. That was on your copy of the file. He’s been there and you’ve never even gone to see him”.

*Oh.*

*Oh. Oh.*

Will could barely keep upright. With a derisive laugh, he looked at them, and shrugged.

“I got a phone call from Jack yesterday night”.

“That’s- that’s not possible, Will” –Price recoiled, as if hurt by the statement.

Little by little, Will put the pieces together, rotating them this way and that. He ran a hand over his face. Of course, of course. Jack sitting at Purnell's right. It was Will's left. Zeller looking at him with neutral eyes, standing to Will's left.

"It was possible, alright, it just, it wasn't from Jack. Or maybe it was at least a part of Jack, but not the conscious part".

Raising his eyes, Will fixed his stare on Zeller, smack in front of him, looking at Will once again with that strange and unusual neutral expression.

It was strange on the technician, but not altogether unfamiliar for Will.

"You've been chasing us all this time, Dr. Lecter?"

Both Katz and Price jumped a step back from their places, turning to look at their colleague with honest terror.

Zeller's small smile was nowhere near his usual grins.

"Ah, it is so pleasant to be seen. Hello, Will. Please do focus with more care".

A second after the words were out of his mouth, Will saw Zeller's expression gradually morphing to surprise. And no little anger.

"Fucker! I didn't say that!"

One step more, and Will's hands took hold of Zeller's head, fingers cradling from the temples out, his eyes searching searching in the blue-green of the technician.

"What the hell is Lecter doing in my head! Get him out. Get the hell out! Oh, I mean, please get out, this is freaking wrong".

Quickly gaining back her calm, Katz came to stand beside Will, holding Zeller by the shoulders to keep him still.

"Stay still, Z. You've been compromised for who knows how long. Let Will take a look at you. Tilt your head to the left, let him in. Easy."

"Easy? Hah, easy for you to say, you don't have a cannibal with a taste for brains in your head".

Will ignored the panicky banter, letting his thoughts slip through Zeller's mind when the other man grudgingly blinked and leaned his head down.

It was a bit surprising, and chastising for Will, to find out just how apt at mind connection Brian Zeller was. The man kept eye contact all the time, and seemed lucid during all the immersion, visualizing internally all the places where Will slid his mental alter ego over, following Will's mind with ease, a bit of annoyance and a huge amount of gratitude in the mind realm. Zeller blinked, transmitting perfectly well his thoughts to Will.

*I'd rather have you with me in case Lecter is still here.*

But Lecter was nowhere to be seen in Zeller's mind anymore.

Maybe he had gone back to Jack's mind, back to the Bureau, to use the man's voice for inexistent calls. Or he was watching them through the eyes of another person with friendly brain waves. Or had gone to hide in the brain of the kid from Communications, the one who had given Will a corrupted file.

Possibilities were endless.

Lecter's mind was free. In a sense, at least.

The man was roaming, his thoughts lingering in cracks and holes and through every open door, with them and behind them, escapee and chaser by turns.

*Occam's razor. First door will give you the prize.*

*Big picture, big white picture. Focus, focus.*

Will swore, loudly and long, letting go of Zeller's face. Fumbling for his cellphone, he gestured for the other three to come with him up front, towards where the mission leader was standing with the rest of his unit. Will was already dialing.

"Let's inform Purnell. Hannibal's been in lab one all along".

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"Do you think he's got it now, then?"

"Hmmm".

"We should hurry back, in that case".

"Yes, we should".

"Do I take care of the flight or-"

"It's been taken care of. Please board immediately".

"Come with me".

“Very well, then. Shall we?”

End Notes

How do you come up with something like a Lecter Whisperer, Brian? Your brain is full of mysteries. It's a nice brain, though. Hannibal actually honestly liked you, a little. A bit. Well, it was not so dull to talk to you, at least. He found it amusing that you didn't know you were skilled in thought manipulation. He saved that little snippet of info for when it would best serve him, of course.

Oh. And Jack. I am sorry. Yes, well, at least a part of your brain is making an appearance here. Hannibal thought it would be demoralizing for Graham to find out you were in a comma from the get go, but on the other hand, the doctor also thought it good for Will to hear your voice to guide him.

The question here is: just how wounded and weak and restrained Hannibal is, to resort to such fragile manipulations? Who knows. He's very pleased to get at least a second of eye contact with Will, though.

We will find out soon that, deep down, that second of eye contact also sparkled something within Will.

Finally, my apologies for the break in narrator consistency by the end. Eight lines of outsiders' perspective, for your reading pleasure. Anyone interested in taking a guess on who they might be?

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